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Secrecy: the Hard Way

Democracy by its nature is an untidy system of government, nowhere more than in the United States. The sooner President Reagan and his immediate circle of advisers accept this fact, the better off everybody will be.

It isn't especially surprising that the President has developed something like paranoia about news leaks. Most of his recent predecessors suffered from the same malady.

Disgruntled officials, sometimes at the very highest levels, have a habit of leaking news of impending decisions with which they disagree in hopes that public reaction will force a reversal. Presidents, faced with such "disloyalty," tend to confuse genuine breaches of national security with disclosures that are merely embarrassing.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to suppress every piece of information that may be of value to a potential adversary without also depriving the American people of their right to know what is going on inside their government—and to know in time to make their voices heard one way or the other.

When the day comes that the American system of government is neat and tidy, with all the corners tucked in and no strings hanging out, Presidents of the United States may lead more comfortable lives, but democracy as we know it will no longer exist.

These thoughts, as you might have guessed, are occasioned by the Administration's follow-up order Tuesday tightening the rules on disclosure of so-called national-security information.

Fortunately, the Administration decided to drop one provision of a Jan. 12 presidential directive that required government employes to get a senior official's permission before conversing with the media, and then to file written reports on the conversation. The White House ultimately recognized the Big Brother absurdity of that requirement.

But an order signed this week by William P. Clark, Reagan's assistant for national security, betrays the same mentality.

The order sets up a system under which each copy of a document circulated by the National Security Council will be made available only to officials signing a secrecy pledge and agreeing to cooperate with investigations into violations—an apparent reference to lie-detector tests.

Clark also ordered all departments to limit the number of persons having access to national-security information to an "absolute minimum." There are rumbles indicating that, further down the line, the White House may seek legislation authorizing tougher enforcement of such rules.

There are such things as military secrets, and in theory the Administration's anti-leak campaign can be justified on that basis.

So far, however, the Reagan team has failed to cite any convincing cases of genuine national-security breaches. The premature disclosure of the U.S. decision to sell new jets to Taiwan was diplomatically embarrassing, for example, but was hardly a breach of national security.

In the atmosphere that will be created by secrecy pledges and lie-detector tests, there will be a natural tendency throughout government to overclassify information in order to be on the safe side. This stands to have several bad effects.

One is to provide the President's team with a handy way of burying politically embarrassing information under a national-security label.

Another is excessive compartmentalization of information, with the result that the left hand frequently will not know what the right hand is doing. This makes for bad policy decisions. It also leads to a public impression of confusion and ineptitude that the Administration should be at pains to avoid.

Unfortunately, it appears that Reagan and his team will have to learn the hard way.